

In Which I Talk About DRM
(Or more specifically, SecuROM)
By Peter Olsen

I do not condone piracy in any way. However, neither do I condone the measures that Electronic Arts and other game publishers have taken to combat said piracy. I will now explain why.

SecuROM has been in the spotlight for just over a year now, since the release of 2k Games' BioShock. DRM has been getting more and more difficult and complicated over the years, but Bioshock marked the point where the general public cried: 'No more!'

But what makes SecuROM so different from all the previous methods of protection used? SecuROM operates by installing a separate executable onto the user's computer, which is something the old fashioned CD-check did not do. It installs itself into the core of the operating system, giving itself administrative privileges over your entire system. This poses a security threat, as it creates a back door that makes it possible for a hacker to take control of your system. Once installed, SecuROM can never be removed, even if you uninstall the game that uses it. It is possible to dig around in the registry, and try to remove it from there, but this is highly dangerous and not recommended, unless you know computers very well, and know exactly what you are doing.

SecuROM requires the game to be activated over the Internet, using EA's activation servers. But if EA's servers go down for any reason, then there is no way for the user to activate their game. Ten years from now, will EA still exist? And will they still be spending money to run the activation servers for a ten-year-old game? If not, then there is no way for you to get your dusty disc off the shelf, and just play it, as you are able to do with ten-year-old games today.

Electronic Arts also put in its version of SecuROM, an activation limit. Once you reach the limit, (either 3 or 5, depending on the game,) you will be unable to reinstall the game that you've purchased. At that point, you can call up EA support, and ask for more activations, or you can buy the game again.

In the game Monkey Island, you get captured by natives who lock you in a bamboo hut. However, there is a trap door in the floor through which you may escape. After which, if you walk up to the natives again, they will throw you back in the hut, and nail the door shut. But you can still escape through the trap door. And if you go up to them again, they do the same, again and again, adding more stuff on the door, until finally it is a steel vault with a timed lock and an alarm system. But even with all that technology, you can still go through the trap door.

DRM, in the way it is currently implemented, is similar. Publishers add more and more security checks, but in the end, no matter what measures you put in place, as long as the executable resides on the system, the pirates will still be able to just edit it and remove the part that says 'Do a security check.'

I believe that having no DRM in place at all, is actually a better way to go. When Stardock released Sins of a Solar Empire, the game still sold well, despite having no DRM at all. Whereas Spore, an EA title using SecuROM, is breaking records for the number of pirated downloads.

Furthermore, Spore was cracked five days before the release. As such there is no sense in still having the DRM in place. There is not one pirate, anywhere, ever, that will ever be hindered by it, as it's already cracked. Average customers on the other hand, who legally purchased the game, will always be under the burden of unwanted software installed on their PC, and limited installs.

Furthermore, if you don't include DRM in your game, the money that would have gone toward that could instead be channeled elsewhere.

Also, clean house. When the game hits the torrents days before release, you can't blame people from the Internet. They're not sneaking into your concrete steel-plated vault, avoiding the trip mines and automated turrets you have guarding the Golden Disc. They're pirates, not ninjas. Someone on the inside, or someone you have a business deal with, is leaking your game out.

When sending pre-release versions around to magazines and the like, you could put in a simple number somewhere in the code that would at least tell you where the torrent came from. So if the copy you gave to FattyGamerz Magazine shows up on the web, for the next game, you could wait until *after* the release to send them their copy. Make the pirates buy at least *one* copy before it hits the net. That means that paying customers will get the game before the pirates do, which is a good thing.